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Rachel Andres is the director of a solar cooking project that has transformed the lives of women in the refugee camps of Chad and Darfur. Female refugees have been at high risk of rape and sexual violence as they foraged for firewood outside the camps, but the introduction of sun-powered cookers has reduced their need to burn traditional fires. Rachel is being awarded this year's Charles Bronfman prize for her humanitarian work.

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**Rachel with Zanuba, a woman from one of the refugee camps in Chad.
Photograph: Toby Dershowitz**

The solar cooking project began with Jewish World Watch (JWW), an organisation that was formed almost four years ago in Los Angeles with the aim of ensuring that no group anywhere in the world is ever again targeted for extinction without people of conscience rising up in protest.

Perhaps one of the reasons this resonates with me is because my grandmother's family – 22 of them – were killed in Europe in the Holocaust. She survived – she had left Poland in 1919 to escape an arranged marriage and was in America when the war broke out. Being a strong-willed woman who didn't want to marry who her parents had chosen for her actually saved her life.

I went to my synagogue to hear the co-founder and president of JWW speak about the situation in Darfur. And when I heard her speak I thought: "I've got to do something about this."

In Darfur and neighbouring Chad, women and girls from the refugee camps are being

attacked and raped as they go to forage for firewood. But without wood they can't cook for their families. Out of all the refugees in the Darfur camps 80% are women and children. Most of the men have been killed.

JWW's women's committee discussed a variety of options, like providing rape crisis centres in the camps and sending over trauma and grief counsellors – very western ideas really. But we felt we had to do something to help these women, who had little choice but to send their daughters off to find wood, risking assault and rape.

Then I heard about a small pilot project in one of the refugee camps, which used the sun's rays to cook food. It meant that women wouldn't have to leave the camp so often to find firewood. I hunted around and found the KoZon Foundation, a Dutch organisation that was to become our partner on the ground. Together we joined forces with Solar Cookers International, a US-based non-profit organisation that raises money for solar cookers.

The Iridimi camp in Chad has 17,000 refugees living in it, and we set a goal of giving everyone a solar cooker – two for each family, one to cook their rice or macaroni and the other to cook their sauce or make tea.

In the beginning it seemed like a lofty goal, but we were determined to achieve it. We have recently begun to expand the project to a second camp that houses 22,000 refugees. We have a small manufacturing plant there, where we employ women to manufacture cookers and train other women. The hope is that we'll go into a third camp soon and then expand the project to many more camps housing the Darfur refugees. The scale of their need is massive.

The project has been funded by private donations. We figured out that it would only cost \$30 to provide one family with two solar cookers, pot holders and training. The fundraising took on a life of its own. Once people started to hear about it they realised they could do something to help, that giving just \$30 dollars could help a family survive.

We've raised over a \$1m, but the majority of our donations have come in \$30 increments. We had people all over the US raising money through car washes and bake sales. One girl started to paint rocks and sell them for a dollar each, and she has raised over \$3,500.

Because the tragedy is so enormous in Darfur and Chad, people often feel powerless. They ask: "What can we really do?" But this project has shown them that there is something we can do. We may not be able to find the overall solution to the Darfur problem, but we can help protect the lives of women and girls until the world addresses the genocide going on there.

The solar cookers aren't just about safety, they're also better for the health of the refugees – women were suffering from lung and eye problems from bending over smokey fires for long periods of time. There's an environmental advantage too. If Chad's 250,000 refugees keep cutting down trees for firewood, estimates are that in two years there will be no wood left.

The solar cookers decrease that need for wood.

When we visited Chad in October the women told us that they now have time to do things like attend to their children and take care of elderly relatives. Previously, they had had to trek for miles in the burning 100-degree sun to find firewood. As you can imagine, in a refugee camp with 17,000 people, they would have to go further away from the camp each time.

The cooker itself is very simple – it's a piece of cardboard covered with foil, cut so that the angle of the sun's rays can hit the foil and then hit a black pot underneath. The cooker is generally ready to within two hours – within 10 minutes the pot is hot to the touch.

It's an odd process – every time I use the cooker I'm shocked it works. I think this was one of the reasons why other humanitarian groups didn't get involved with solar cooking, because they thought the refugee women wouldn't buy into it. This is a culture that for thousands of years has cooked on a three-stone fire. But the women couldn't be more appreciative of the device.

When I found out I was being awarded the Charles Bronfman prize this year I was completely overwhelmed. The Bronfman family is a model of philanthropy and generosity for so many people around the world. Already, receiving the award has affected our work with the refugees; I've had so many calls from organisations interested in partnering with us. It has opened new doors and hopefully will enable us to expand to other camps faster. As the JWW tradition teaches us, "do not stand idly by".

Just as I promised my grandmother I would bear witness and tell our family's story, I promised the women of the Iridimi camp that I would bear witness to the stories of the 4669 refugee families. Nobody was there to save my grandmother's family, but I hope I can help to ensure the safety of the families from Darfur.

- Rachel Andres was speaking to [Anna Bruce-Lockhart](#).

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